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JOHN BRIGHT

BY THE RIGHT HONORABLE GEORGE W. E. RUSSELL

“MY life is in my speeches.” This was Bright’s judgment on himself, and it is profoundly true. He was the greatest orator of the Victorian age; but his speeches were no mere examples—even though they were the highest examples—of what oratory can be. They were the effective instruments by which great changes in human affairs were brought about. They were not words but things. To read them is to follow the course of English politics through fifty momentous years; and the fiery passion which they breathe stands in curious contrast with the quietness, and even dullness, of the setting in which they were conceived. When one reads the description of Bright’s daily life, as drawn by his accomplished biographer, Mr. George Trevelyan, one is irresistibly reminded of the saying in *Friendship’s Garland*: “A piano in a Quaker’s drawing-room is a step for him to more humane life.” That “more humane life,” which consists in the steady cultivation of the whole nature, and the constant endeavor “to know the best that has been thought and said in the world”—in a word, the life of culture—had no attraction for Bright. He knew his Bible and he knew his Milton, and he knew little else in the way of literature. Yet his most remarkable endowment was his intuitive sense for the value of words, and for the balance and rhythm of sentences. His speeches will probably be read for literary enjoyment, even when the great controversies with which they deal have fallen into a very distant background; but, as they fell from his lips, they did not owe their whole effect to their verbal perfection. His voice was singularly pure and penetrating. His gesture was restrained, but full of dignity. He spoke very slowly. Matthew Arnold, after hearing him at Birmingham in 1858, wrote thus: “Perhaps there is not flow enough—not that he halts or stammers, but I like to have sometimes more of a *rush* than he ever

gives you." Whether it be a merit or a defect is arguable; but the extreme deliberation of Bright's speaking was one of its most conspicuous marks; and, to my mind, it was supremely effective, because it conveyed the impression of considered judgment and profound conviction.

Beneath his feet the human ocean lay,
And wave on wave flowed into space away.
Methought no clarion could have sent its sound
Even to the centre of the hosts around;
And, as I thought, rose the sonorous swell,
As from some church-tower swings the silvery bell;
Aloft and clear, from airy tide to tide,
It glided, easy as a bird may glide;

To the last verge of that vast audience sent,
It played with each wild passion as it went,
Now stirred the uproar; now the murmur stilled;
And sobs or laughter answered as it willed.¹

Those words, though written of another orator, precisely describe Bright's effect upon a popular audience. Sarcasm succeeded pathos, and pathos gave way to humor; stern reprobation of moral wrong heralded entrancing visions of a time when the Kingdom of righteousness and truth shall be established on earth; and, in each successive mood, the orator conveyed to the heart of every listener the conviction of an absolute sincerity. It was this peculiar characteristic of his speaking that, at more than one political crisis, determined the fortunes of the strife in which he was engaged.

The Brights had migrated from Wiltshire to Lancashire, and had established themselves as cotton-spinners in Rochdale, where John was born in 1811. There is no occasion to describe his home, his rough schooling, his early travels, or his entrance (when he was fifteen) into his father's business; but something must be said about the religion in which he was reared, for it colored his whole character and life. From first to last he was a member of the Society of Friends, although, in middle life, he discarded their quaint ritualisms of dress and speech. His active participation in politics was inconsistent with the Friends' traditions, and they always maintained that he had lost in spirituality through his immersion in the things of time. I have been told by one of

¹ Bulwer Lytton, "St. Stephen's."

those who heard him on the rare occasions when he spoke at their meetings, that his speaking lacked that inwardness of tone which is the characteristic of quietism, and is the natural utterance of those who "endure as seeing the invisible." But, though politics may have modified Bright's Quakerism, his Quakerism much more profoundly modified his politics. His hatred of war, his disapproval of capital punishment, his instinctive leaning towards the side of mercy—even his erroneous doctrine that "force is not a remedy" for crimes of violence—all had their origin in his Quaker-like view of human life. He loathed with a peculiar disgust that paradoxical conception of Christian Soldiership, which wars without reference to right or wrong. When the strange mania of Gordon-worship was at its height, he wrote thus about the popular idol: "Gordon cared little for his own life, and apparently less for the lives of others, or he would not have devoted himself to the savagery of war in China and the Soudan. . . . The war-spirit which reigned supreme in Gordon seems to me wholly at variance with the spirit inculcated in the New Testament." Bright jeopardized his public career by his impassioned resistance to the Crimean War. He sacrificed his seat for Manchester by protesting against the Chinese War. He declined the India Office in 1868, partly at least because he "could not take part in the duties of the office which are connected with the military affairs of India." In 1882 he resigned his place in the Cabinet, just too late, as a testimony against the bombardment of Alexandria; and in 1885, when Gladstone was hurling vague menaces at Russia, he wrote in dejection to a friend: "Be the Government Liberal or Tory, much the same thing happens—war with all its horrors and miseries and crimes and cost; talkers and writers being mostly in favor of it, and the multitude approving or assenting to the wickedness in high places."

So much for war. On other methods of taking human life the Quaker was not less explicit. When the late Sir Henry Hawkins was made a judge, he met Bright at dinner and told him of his promotion, expecting to be congratulated. Bright laid his hand on his friend's shoulder, and said, in a voice of deep emotion, "Be *merciful*, Hawkins, be merciful!" For forty years of public life he had kept a watchful eye on death-sentences in particular, and on criminal justice in general, making private appeals to successive Home Sec-

retaries on behalf of those convicted persons who seemed more unfortunate than criminal. Again and again in his journal occur such entries as this: "Letter from Sir George Grey, saying he had reprieved the convict at Warwick; great relief to me, for his fate has been a burden on my mind for some days"—though the convict was an entire stranger to him. When pleading in the House of Commons for the abolition of capital punishment, he said, with reference to the awful responsibility of the Home Secretary in exercising the prerogative of mercy: "I wonder that all the Right Honorable gentleman has gone through in these painful cases has not driven him stark mad;" and he concluded on the impressive theme that "human life is sacred, and on that principle alone can human life be secure."

The same principle animated him in his life-long opposition to the Game Laws. He opposed them in part because he thought them injurious to agriculture, in part because they tended to alienate class from class in rural neighborhoods; but his deepest indignation was aroused by the cruelty which they entailed. "To benefit a sport enjoyed by 40,000 persons at the outside, about 5,000 persons a year were fined, imprisoned, or transported."

Bright's career, which was as direct and uncomplicated as his character, divides itself naturally into eight parts. 1. The preparatory state. 2. The Battle of the Corn Laws. 3. The Factory Acts. 4. The Crimea. 5. The American War. 6. The Franchise. 7. Office. 8. Home Rule. A word must be said about each part in turn.

John Bright had the love of freedom in his blood. He was trained by men who remembered "Peterloo"—who had "gone to attend a meeting and came back from a massacre."¹ He grew to man's estate amid the tumults which attended the Reform Bill of 1832. When that Bill became an Act, Rochdale acquired a Member, and a new life was infused into the politics of the town. The local Liberals were Radicals, keen for a further extension of the suffrage, for the repeal of the Corn Laws, and for the abolition of Church Rates. In all these controversies, young Bright was a leader and a teacher; but it was in the attack on the Church Rates that he first displayed his oratorical supremacy. A violent meeting of protesters against the rate was

¹ At Manchester in 1819.

held in the parish church yard, and Bright, "standing on a tombstone with the Vicar and his brood of clergymen, told them more truth than they were accustomed to hear."

From political strife we must turn for an instant to domestic sorrow, for it was a sorrow which had political issues of far-reaching importance. In December, 1839, John Bright married Elizabeth Priestman, a Quaker maiden whom her friends described as angelic. In October, 1840, she bore him a daughter, and in September, 1841, she died. What then ensued was told by Bright, in memorable words. "I was in the depths of grief, I might almost say of despair, for the light and sunshine of my house had been extinguished. . . . Mr. Cobden called upon me as his friend, and addressed me with some words of consolation. After a time he looked up, and said: 'There are thousands of homes in England at this moment where wives, mothers and children are dying of hunger. Now,' he said, 'when the first paroxysm of your grief is past, I would advise you to come with me, and we will never rest till the Corn Law is repealed.' I accepted his invitation. . . . I felt in my conscience that there was a work which somebody must do, and therefore I accepted his invitation; and from that time we never ceased to labor hard on behalf of the resolution which we had made. . . . And since then, though there has been suffering, and much suffering, in many homes in England, yet no wife and no mother and no little child has been starved to death as the result of a famine made by law."

The Parliament which had been elected in 1837 was dissolved in 1841. The General Election resulted in a Tory majority of eighty, and Peel became Prime Minister. Cobden now began his Parliamentary career, as Member for Stockport, and Gladstone, whom Peel made Vice-President of the Board of Trade, soon perceived that "Cobden will be a worrying man about corn." Cobden "worried" in the House, and Bright declaimed in the country. Both threw their wonderful powers unreservedly into the work, and both were signally successful. Cobden transfixed Peel, who had reshuffled the sliding scale, and demolished a Tory Member called Ferrand, who had attacked the mill-owners. Bright called a meeting of merchants on the Manchester Exchange, to protest against the Corn Law, and carried his resolution without a dissentient voice. "Verily," wrote

Cobden, "we are not toiling in vain." In the autumn of 1842, Cobden and Bright set forth on a missionary journey, preaching the gospel of Free Trade all over the North of England, and in January, 1843, they crossed the Tweed, and found themselves in a country already converted. The fighting now waxed furious, inside the House and out of it. I quote from Mr. Trevelyan: "Once a month or oftener, from March, 1843, until the Corn Law fell in 1846, a London opera-house was packed from floor to ceiling, from the back of the pit to the back of the stage, with an audience that was never once bored, and never once lukewarm; and in the twelve weeks between December, 1842, and the end of the following February, one hundred and thirty-six smaller meetings were held in London alone; in the provinces, each big city had a mass meeting nearly every month, and each market-town at least once a year. . . . In the summer of 1843, Cobden and Bright began their attack on the rural districts, and spoke face to face with the 'protected' classes. It was an easy task for them to convert the Agricultural Laborer. The shortest and the best speech made in the whole course of the controversy was that of a farm-hand at one of the League meetings: 'I be protected, and I be starving.'" But though the laborers were easily converted, and even the farmers began to give ear to the new doctrine, the landlords remained obdurate. Bright's "prize-fighting speeches"—the epithet is his own—irritated them past endurance. There even was some vague talk of prosecuting the agitators for sedition, and Bright wrote thus to his sister: "I will try and be careful. I have no wish for martyrdom, even in so good a cause. The public feeling is evidently with the League, and our cause is so obviously good that I do not think we shall be attacked by the Law. If we are, I trust you will put the best construction on our actions, and not disown me as a rebel and incendiary."

And now a great change in Bright's way of life was at hand. Cobden told him that it was his plain duty to enter Parliament, and there bear his part in conducting the cause to its approaching victory. There were reasons connected with his family, with his business, with his religious associations, which made him hesitate; but, after full consideration, he determined to stand. He wrote to his wife's mother: "Don't blame me; hope for me and pray for me. The future may prove me not wholly wrong."

In July, 1843, he entered the House of Commons as Member for the City of Durham. His maiden speech was delivered on the 7th of August—of course, on the Corn Laws—and was remarkable for a kind of veiled prophecy that Peel would shortly sever himself from a party with which he disagreed, and would become the "Minister, not merely of the Queen, but of the people also." A series of good harvests had rendered the evils of Protection rather less intolerable, and, in spite of some mutinous murmurs, Peel closed the Session of 1845 with a great majority in both Houses. Before Christmas, as Lord Beaconsfield said, "the mysterious but universal sickness of a single root had changed the history of the world"; Lord John Russell had been converted to "total and immediate" repeal of the Corn Laws, and Peel had followed suit. In January, 1846, Peel, at the head of a reconstructed Government, opened the Session which was to repeal the Corn Laws. The Corn Bill passed the Lords on the 25th of June, and, on the 2nd of July, the "Anti-Corn Law League," having accomplished its great purpose, decided to "suspend its active operations." The victory was won.

The least satisfactory passage of Bright's life is that which relates to the Factory Acts. We make all due allowance for the congenital prejudices of a manufacturer's son, bred in a mill where the factory laws were administered with unusual leniency, and, by conviction as well as temperament, a stout individualist. We see without difficulty that these and cognate circumstances must have tended to color Bright's outlook on the beneficent reforms with which Lord Shaftesbury's name is so gloriously associated. We admit all that has to be admitted, but, after all is said and done, Lord Shaftesbury's damning sentence stands upon the record: "Bright was ever my most malignant opponent. Cobden, though bitterly hostile, was better than Bright."

Let us not reason about this sad episode, but regard it sorrowfully, and pass on.

Bright was once walking with one of his sons past the Guards' Monument in Waterloo Place. The boy asked the meaning of the single word inscribed on the base—CRIMEA. The father's answer was as emphatic as the inscription: "A CRIME." Those two words epitomize Bright's whole mind and heart at the most trying, and most heroic, period of his long life.

For nearly forty years Europe had enjoyed the sunshine of unbroken peace, but, by the end of 1853, Russia and Turkey were at War. England had no concern in the quarrel, but presently espoused the cause of Turkey. The fatal step was announced on March 29th, 1854, and on the 31st Bright addressed to the House of Commons the first of "his great Crimean speeches." Great those speeches certainly were, and are—great in all the qualities which make oratory one of the highest arts. They are only four in number, or, if we add the famous "Letter to Absalom Watkin," five; but they made a deeper and more enduring effect on those who heard them and read them than anything which their author had ever uttered. There are people still alive who can describe the awful hush which fell upon the House when on February 23rd, 1855, he appealed to the ancient and vainglorious Palmerston to stay the effusion of human blood. "I do not suppose that your troops are to be beaten in actual conflict with the foe, or that they will be driven into the sea; but I am certain that many homes in England, in which there now exists a fond hope that the distant one may return—many such homes will be rendered desolate when the next mail shall arrive. The Angel of Death has been abroad throughout the land; you may almost hear the beating of his wings." Never again did a single phrase of Bright's strike so directly home to the hearts of those who heard it. Men who could not quote another sentence from his speeches remember "The Angel of Death." Cobden, who heard the speech delivered, said to him as he sat down amid the sympathetic thunder which rewards an oratorical triumph, "You went very near that time. If you had said '*flapping*,' instead of '*beating* of his wings,' the House would have laughed." Quite so; but Bright had a genius for language, which bore him safe even on the dizziest heights. It is to be borne in mind that, in opposing the Crimean War, Bright did not take "high Quaker ground." He never denied the abstract right to take up arms on good occasion; he supported the suppression of the Indian Mutiny, and of the slave-owners' secession in America. He opposed the Crimean War because, by engaging in it, we set ourselves in hostility to all the Christian populations of the Turkish Empire, and fought for an evil end—"the perpetual maintenance of the most immoral and filthy of all depotisms, over one of the fairest portions

of the earth which it has desolated, and over a population which it has degraded, but not been able to destroy."

In opposing the Crimean War, Bright was against England, high and low alike. In his attitude towards the Civil War in America, he had the rank and wealth and social influence of the country against him, the Church and the Press, and also the huge weight of middle-class opinion; but he had the working classes on his side. To their justice and generosity he appealed with a noble confidence, and he used with all his might a splendid weapon which lay ready to his hand in the Englishman's hatred of slavery. Half-hearted Liberals demanded the recognition of the Independence of the Southern States. Renegade Radicals even clamored for English intervention in the interests of the South. The North was justly offended by our ignorant partisanship and unskilful handling of international disputes; and again and again we trembled on the verge of war. That this supreme calamity was averted was mainly due to two men—among Americans, to Charles Francis Adams, who represented the United States in London; and, among Englishmen, to John Bright; though justice requires that we should remember the part played by Prince Albert, Disraeli, and the Duke of Argyll.

From first to last, Bright was an ardent advocate for the extension of the suffrage, in this one respect pursuing a different line from his friend Cobden, whose whole heart was in fiscal and economic questions, and who had little interest in merely political machinery. "Bright and Cobden" is a combination of names which comes trippingly off the tongue; but in the fight for Parliamentary reform Bright stood alone. "The nation," he said, "in every country dwells in the cottage"; and he could not rest till the cottage had acquired its rights.

The mental distress through which Bright passed during the long-drawn agony of the Crimea had left him damaged. He suffered from what we nowadays call a "nervous breakdown," and his doctors kept him out of public work all through the years 1856 and 1857. He had sat for Durham from 1841 to 1847. Then, in the flush of victory over Protection, he was returned unopposed for Manchester, and, after a contest, again in 1852. In March, 1857, Palmerston appealed to the country for support in his most unworthy war with China, and the country gave him what he desired.

Bright was known to be opposed to Palmerston's policy, and his seat was fiercely challenged. Being abroad and ill, he was precluded from fighting his own battle, and he was defeated. In the following June there was a by-election at Birmingham, and Bright was invited to contest the seat. His health did not permit him to address a public meeting, or even to make entry into the town. But, as soon as it was known that he was to stand, the Conservative candidate withdrew, and he was returned unopposed. So began a connection with Birmingham which lasted till his death. Thus we return to the subject of Parliamentary Reform; for, as soon as Bright was permitted to resume his political activities, he addressed his new constituents in a magnificent discourse, which, after surveying the field of general politics, concluded with a strong appeal for a further extension of the suffrage, and a splendid peroration about "the impending struggle."

The struggle "impended" for some years before it began in good earnest. Palmerston died in October, 1865. Lord Russell—the "Lord John" of the first Reform Bill—became Prime Minister, and the leader of the House of Commons was Gladstone, who had lately asserted the moral right of "every man who is not presumably disqualified to come within the pale of the Constitution." Obviously the time had now come for a real Reform Bill, and shrewd observers saw that, while Russell and Gladstone were in office, Bright was in power. The Bill was introduced in March, 1866. It fell far short of Bright's ideals; but he thought it "an honest Bill," and supported it heartily. Eventually the Government was defeated by a combination of Tories and malcontent Liberals, but the debates which preceded its downfall were animated and exciting in a high degree. The duel between Gladstone and Lowe is historic, and Bright's pleasantries about Caves of Adullam and Hairy Terriers have passed into the sacred language of English politics. Defeated on the Reform Bill, the Government resigned. Lord Derby became Prime Minister, with Disraeli as Leader of the House of Commons. Bright devoted the autumn to a great campaign on behalf of Parliamentary Reform. He was now at the height of his power. Never again did he wield such compelling power over great masses of his fellow-citizens. Never did he see such immediate and such tremendous results from his words, "Half-

a-dozen great out-door demonstrations in the principal centres of population, and half-a-dozen speeches in great halls by Bright, sufficed to awe the Conservative Party into submission." That submission was complete indeed. In the Session of 1867, the Derby-Disraeli Government established Household Suffrage. Lord Cranborne (afterwards Lord Salisbury), who had left the Cabinet sooner than be a party to this revolution, said, with bitter truth: "If it be a Conservative triumph to have adopted the principles of your most determined adversary, the Hon. Member for Birmingham . . . then the Conservative Party has won no triumph so signal as this."

The newly-enfranchised democracy exercised its power for the first time at the General Election of 1868; sent Disraeli to the right-about, and made Gladstone Prime Minister. Now came Bright's hour of trial. Gladstone implored him to take a place in the Cabinet, and Gladstone's appeal was backed by the whole Liberal Party. Yet Bright shrank back. His health was no longer what it once had been. He felt his own "dislike of work, and of fetters, and of official position." He preferred to "dwell among his own people." He declined to "put on livery." But in the issue, his strong sense of civil duty prevailed over all personal considerations, and he became President of the Board of Trade. In the previous year he had gallantly championed Queen Victoria against an unmannerly attack at a public meeting; the Queen felt grateful, and welcomed him into her Government with genuine good will. On his first visit to Osborne he seems to have found himself completely at home, for a courtier exclaimed: "Well! I never expected to see John Bright here, winning his money at Blind Hookey." But, in spite of this auspicious beginning, his tenure of office was brief and unsatisfactory. In 1870 he was laid aside by renewed illness; retired from the Cabinet, and only re-entered it, at Gladstone's earnest solicitation, for a few months in 1873. The Government came to an end in 1874, and Bright declared that he was now "on the shelf." After the great Liberal victory in 1880, he again joined Gladstone's Cabinet, and in 1882 he retired, as a protest against the bombardment of Alexandria. This was the end of his official life.

It was a singular infelicity of Bright's career that in his later years he found himself involved in bitter hostility

to the Irish people, whose civil and religious rights he had in the past maintained with singular courage. When he was on his deathbed, he received a truly noble tribute from Mr. T. M. Healy, who said: "It was when Ireland had fewest friends that your voice was loudest on her side." But in the interval there had been bitter estrangement, and the causes of it were various. Bright was, by instinct and habit, a supporter of law and order, and he loathed murder and outrage as he loathed the battlefield and the gallows. He thought the Irish party were "rebels," and told them so. They in return hit back, and did not spare him. He believed even passionately in religious liberty, and the opposition of the Irish members to Bradlaugh's admission stirred his contemptuous indignation. I can recall the peculiar intonation—something between a snarl and a sneer—with which he reminded them of what was involved in their oath of allegiance—"that oath which you esteem so sacred that you will suffer no man to take it with unhallowed lips." And so the quarrel went on, from bad to worse, till Gladstone's inopportune adoption of Home Rule brought the issue to a head, and smashed the Liberal party. Lord Hartington was massive, and Mr. Chamberlain was dexterous; but Bright's high morality and noble record gave a weight to his protest against Parnellism which no one else could command. From the day when it was known that he would vote against the Home Rule Bill, its fate was sealed; and his speech at Birmingham during the General Election of 1886 did more than any other utterance to secure the Unionist victory. Before another Home Rule Bill could be brought in, he was in his honored grave.

What manner of man was John Bright, in his outward aspect and conversation? In the first place, his portraits show clearly that he was a very much better-looking man in middle life.¹ He was short, and his head was too large for his body. The daguerreotype taken when he was, say, forty, suggests the epithet "smug." The drawing by Duval gives one the notion that the artist was trying to soften those characteristics. But the pictures of him as an old man are stately, and even beautiful. I once heard an Irish rhetorician refer to "the snows of that venerable and vener-

¹ For some unknown reason, *Punch* used to represent Bright with an eyeglass, which he never wore.

ated head," and they formed a noble crown to his clear-cut features, his furrowed cheeks and searching eyes. Most characteristic was the downward turn of the corners of his mouth, exactly expressive of that half-humorous scorn which marked alike his conversation and his oratory. Again and again it relieves the solemn argument of his speeches. In his Public Letters it was seen in full perfection. For, to say the truth, Bright was easily offended, and when offended he was not slow to show his displeasure. I once was breakfasting with Mr. Gladstone, and Bright was of the party. During the meal, our host told a mildly humorous story of a Quaker, who refused to subscribe for building a new church, but said he would gladly help in pulling down the old one. We all tittered obsequiously, but Bright said, with down-turned lip: "The Friends are made the subject of some very *stoopid* stories."

My own acquaintance with Bright was hereditary. My father¹ had sat in Parliament with him for several years, and, unlike most of the Whig aristocracy, had always held him in high regard and esteem. This good will Bright was not slow to return, as the following tender and beautiful letter shows:

Dear Lord Charles Russell,

I was on the Continent when I saw the announcement of your loss² in *The Times*. I was shocked, and I pictured to myself your sorrow and that of your circle, and in some measure I joined in it. I seem never able to dissociate fear from weddings. I have lost two sisters soon after marriage—one on the birth of her first, and the other on the birth of her second child—the succeeding fever was the cause of death. These events so affected me, that I never attend a wedding ceremony without a feeling of doubt and sadness.

"Believe me, I sympathize deeply with you in your affliction, and I hope that you have in it such consolation as the case admits of.

I am always,

Most sincerely yours,

John Bright.

It was, I suppose, on account of this mutual regard that, when I entered Parliament at the age of twenty-seven, Bright received me with the most friendly kindness. His manner towards young men was perfect: natural, simple, easy; with plenty of quiet fun, and, now and then, when

¹ Lord Charles James Fox Russell (1807-1894).

² The death of a daughter in her first confinement.

one had been unusually foolish, a touch of sarcasm. On one occasion at least he did me the honor to consult me about his action in a painful controversy; and, though our political paths diverged when Home Rule was propounded, our personal relations were not the least embittered. With my whole heart I loved and honored him, and I count it one of my highest privileges to have heard, even though only in its failing force, that "God-gifted organ-voice of England," which had spent its music in the service of humanity and freedom.

GEORGE W. E. RUSSELL.